

Fortnightly Sermon

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FAITHFULNESS

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FAITHFULNESS.

“Faithful unto death.”—REVELATIONS, II, 10.

I am to speak to you this morning of Faithfulness.

It is nearly fifty years ago that a young girl was living in the city of Boston. She was fortunate in her home and in her friends. She had been brought up in a circle of great cultivation and refinement, of very lovely social life, with troops of good people about her, many of whom were dear to her, and all helpful, instructive, refined, elevated. At the time that I speak of, this girl, finely educated, excellently trained in mind and in all the social virtues, was sought in marriage by a young man who was to come hither to what was then the wild West, to take for himself a farm, and live the life of a cultivator of the soil. This girl joined her lot with his, forsook all the charm of the life she was accustomed to, and came to a place not very far away from this city, a place where then the ground was just broken for cultivation, the neighbors few and far, and the society a pioneer company at the outposts of civilization.

I, at the time, was a very little child in the city of Brooklyn, New York State, just beginning the unfolding life of childhood, listening and growing, learning, imitating, using my opening powers in a home that was very sheltered, very quiet, and full of good social life.

Forty years passed away. Let us look at what these forty years had borne in fruit in the life of this young girl that I speak of. When she found herself in the Western country, the new country all unbroken and untamed, and the people about her for the most part as untamed as the soil, she thought very carefully and earnestly over the problem of life before her. She said to herself,—“Here am I, taken away from all those things that would have ministered to my mind, that were educating, training, strengthening me, making me full of resources, mental, spiritual and moral. I find myself suddenly put into this new

place, which bids fair to be full of daily toil for the common necessities of life. New ground is to be broken, much labor done in gleaning food even from this virgin soil, and all the great work of making a home to be undertaken, in a wild and untried place. Now, said the girl to herself, there is great danger of my being so absorbed in this labor as to be sunk in it out of sight of those spiritual realities which happily have been my lot heretofore; wherefore I must make it my rule, she said, and my great and strenuous effort all the time, to keep a firm hold of the idealities of life, of the spiritual values, things which have helped me not to acquire but to be; I must see to it that I continue to grow, as heretofore I have had the means of growing, in mind and soul. I must keep my hold on the ideal within me and without me.

With this reflection she began her life in the three great relations into which she had come. First among them was the relation of a wife. She must take her share in the joint labor and partnership of marriage. She began, therefore, early to make it a point in her life to keep the home full of cheer. She said to herself that with all the disadvantages of her position compared to that from which she had come, still in one way she had more advantages than her husband; for her work, if it were somewhat more monotonous, was at least more sheltered, and had within it more moments to be gleaned for little sprays of thought and swift upliftings of soul and mind. Wherefore it devolved chiefly on her, she said, as she thought it did on the women always, to beautify life. She thought this a power specially given to the womanly soul; it lay on her, she considered, to keep "sweetness and light," as Matthew Arnold has it, a lovely cheer, a beautiful feast not only for the eye so far as might be, but for the soul always, in her home. So her husband never came into the house but he found therein, however dark the day, the inward light of a smile, nor did he ever note that cheer was wanting. By many a little deft touch of the hand she made that beauty of the spirit come forth, and so far as the poor purse of the young couple served, she decorated her home with outward forms and signs of spiritual grace. Her external means for doing this work were three: First, she studiously cultivated flowers. Secondly, having been bred at her home very finely and skillfully in music, she never neglected the practice and

cultivation of that art. She had brought with her from her Eastern home her instrument, a good piano, the only one in that little settlement, and she resolved that one of her most serious duties should be to maintain her skill and her interest in musical exercise. The other outward means was reading. She had but few books; wherewith then she began to learn what Robertson says he found in himself, that to read deeply was better far than reading much. Quickened by her conscience, her love and her aspiration, she made these few books minister to her mind perpetually, and grew on that food by the depth of her penetration into the author's meaning and feeling, and by her own cheerful following forth of the lines of the thinker's thought.

By these means she decorated and cheered her home. And here was the secret of her success, that never in any day did she omit her care of these means. She early learned this great secret, which many learn only when the opportunities are gone and we have to look back on a failure which was so insidious as we went along that we knew not why we failed—this secret, that it was not enough to resolve that she would do this thing or that thing each day, however momentous it might seem to her when she made the resolve, but that time must be used *more definitely*, and that one means of success lay in resolving to do a certain thing at a certain hour each day, and to devote just so much time to it. By that means she was able to succeed. Thus, with all the labors and all the cares of a young farmer's wife, in which she was faithful to the end as well as she was in those other things, she never failed in any day to take her time to read for her soul's good and schooling, and her time to play and sing for the sake of grace and beauty, and her time to cultivate her flowers; all of which she made as essential as the preparation of the food that her husband brought from his cornfields.

Here I perceive a great lesson in this life, which I will stop a moment in the narrative to mention. The lesson is this,—Set your ideals high. For if you set your aim high, you will have always somewhat that is worthy of your faithfulness. To have that which by its very nature is a perpetual invitation, never stooping to you, but calling you, if you would enjoy it, up into the higher regions, is to be greatly stirred to faithfulness of conduct.

This same faithfulness will give us great power with others. With this thought I come to the second great relation in which she lived,—that of a mother. Children she had many, and as they came into her arms she brooded on her duties to them, as she had considered her duties as wife. Then she saw with rapture that one duty is the kindling of fire for another, and that by as much as she had carefully considered what she should do as a wife, already she had done much that was her duty as a mother. She saw she had but to gather the same cheer, the same arts and intellectual life about her little children as they grew, and convert all these things into words and instructions for them, to do a mother's duty. But one thing beside this she added, namely, hospitality. Then she began to open her house very warmly to her children's friends, whereby it came to pass that there was no place where they loved so much to be as in their home, where their friends were welcomed by the mother who was their pride as well as joy.

The third relation into which she had come was that of the citizen. She took up her citizen life in the same manner as the wife's and the mother's duties. And here indeed did her life shine very beautifully by its ideality. All that I have described she might have done for herself only, or for her children about her, for those ends of life and those opportunities which served her own interest and feelings. But if this only had been her aim she would not have succeeded so nobly or so completely. In one of the old ballads a departing knight says to the lady whom he leaves, that she must not grieve at his going forth on the errands of a true knight, for, says he,

"I could not love thee, dear, so well
Loved I not honor more."

So if this young woman had not loved the ideal before herself and her own most precious possessions, she would have had two failures in her own struggles; first, she would not have been able so nobly to persevere, because if what she was thinking of was herself, and not that high ideal that stays aloft and calls to us as a star, then continually she would have been turned aside by other solicitations of self-love, so that she would have failed in that steady pursuit day by day which was her great power.

Secondly, she never would have had influence on others, because wide, inspiring, strengthening power is only to be gotten, as the old Chinese sage said, by perfect sincerity which has no shadow of self-seeking in it; but having that sincerity, she was inspiration and strength to all whom she met. Thus from this faithful home-life of hers, there began to spread out, especially as her children grew, a great wide good through all that community. This showed itself specially in her interest in her church in the village, into which she went and worked with so much heart and soul in spite of her labors as a farmer's wife, as to be a great support and cheer to it, and a veritable light and beam in it as she had been in her home. There, by her music, she gathered all the young people about her, as the community grew, and she instructed them in singing, and trained them, and they did wonderfully good work. She established a little center for books, she taught the need and love of reading, she organized little clubs among old and young, and met with them and led them, and she brought into the social life, even in games, dances and plays, a kind of good fellowship, good manners and elevation, which began to make that little settlement an abode of refinement and gentle life.

True is it that if you set your ideal high, you shall have great influence. Let your nobility of thought, your height of ideal, stand with you in place of power of position or wealth. Is Lord Bacon right when he says, "Good thoughts if they be accepted by God, yet towards man they are little better than good dreams if they be not put into acts, and they cannot be unless there be power and place?" No; for good thoughts *are* power and place. The great philosopher thought not of the might of humble faithfulness, nor saw how the circles of God widen out infinitely. Carlyle calls to us to follow the ideal as within ourselves and in our own very circumstances. Why seek for it without? "Here, in this poor, miserable, hampered, despicable actual, wherein thou even now standest, here or nowhere, is thy ideal; work it out therefrom, and, working, believe, live, be free." And so says Lowell: "The true ideal is not opposed to the real, nor is it any artificial heightening thereof, but lies in it; and blessed are the eyes that find it,"—to know that the true ideal is simply to work nobly, at whatever it

be, and that there is nothing so humble but, with the ideal thus worshiped and wrought forth, shall speak with trumpet tongue.

"No accent of the Holy Ghost
The heedless world has ever lost."

During these forty years in which this lowly but prolific work was going on, I was growing as I could, twelve hundred miles from this woman. What a different lot was mine, by what a different path came I at last into her presence! I lived in a sheltered home, was sent to the best schools, educated tenderly and carefully, then at last going to college and there carefully considered and taught by friends and teachers for three charming and memorable years, and then entering the divinity school, and even more personally and individually made the care of my teachers, and the consideration and solicitous concern of the wise, the old, the good, until at last I came forth, and entered on my first cares and duties as a minister. For some years I worked, till it fell to my lot, with great benefit to myself (as now I can see, but not then), to turn aside awhile and plunge into business cares. For many years I was a business man, working as business men work, doing all manner of business, from the counting room to the duties of a salesman, and traveling far and wide over this country in my business. At last, by a strange meeting of events, just when I was ready to leave my business life, thinking I had obtained from it all that I could afford the time to obtain, a place opened for me in this great West, and now I have been here twelve years nearly, and after half that time I came hither to you in Chicago. During one of my missionary trips as minister of this church, I went to that community where this girl had come as a young wife, and her forty years of faithfulness had been harvested, I went to her home, I saw her, I beheld the fruits of her life. I saw her children with light in their faces, with cultivation in their manners, with intelligence and beaming ideas in their speech and in their eyes. I beheld them lovers of good things, intellectual, graceful, beautiful. I saw her work in the community. I beheld how all came to her as unto a Mother in Israel, then in old age, honored, solicited and loved. I saw that there was hardly any good work in that place that was not connected with her. All

works and labors bore her name. I saw that the church still rested largely on her heart and soul. I saw the fruit of her life in herself, still the light and fire of an eternal youth in her eye and in her manners; her face deeply wrinkled, and out of every one of those various and sanctified traces that life had made, out of them all, a light beaming, and the eye undimmed, the step still elastic, and a manner that bespoke a heart-interest in all the life about her. Still she was singing in the choir, still gathering the young about her and leading them in good things and especially in the music. I noted, and thought too, as I heard the people speak of her, and saw their manner when speaking to her, how all this influence had spread out widely. I saw that as it was in her circle, so truly each one that was in her circle had a circle, and each one in every circle again another circle of his own, and that from her thus was spreading out virtue, help, inspiration, enlightenment, no one could dream how far. And I reflected that there might be many cases unknown to me, and surely were, in which the results of this woman's steady faithfulness of life had borne other direct, distinct, visible fruits; for each man's faithfulness or unfaithfulness holds in its keeping the interests, even the lives of others. I saw recently a poor young woman, now in the prime of life but broken in back, deformed and bowed, her whole life ruined externally, whatever her inward fruit of grace, because a nurse had been unfaithful in her attendance, and let the little child fall on the floor. How many a bank officer, by his unfaithfulness, has brought to loss and despair many a poor hard-working man, who by years of steady industry and economy, had stored up a little deposit of savings, swept away by the officer's unfaithfulness and dishonesty. So in all positions of trust. One reason why I undertook this sermon was that I was moved to it by a word of one of you, who spoke to me of the terrible fact in a late railroad accident, that it had all come about by the absolute unfaithfulness of a railroad official, who employed a drunken engineer, knowing him to be such. Now, perhaps, if that officer of the railroad had been one of the sons of this woman, or of such a mother, or had come into one of the circles of influence of her humble and faithful life, that accident would not have occurred, the lives it cost would have been saved, the sorrows

spared. Besides, who can tell how sometimes such humble fidelity finds tongue? It happens that a poet, a prophet, a philosopher, a preacher, meets such a hidden angel of God, and he takes the lowly faithfulness as his scripture; he knows it is an elder scripture, before all the Bibles; and when he comes to his poem, his book, his sermon thereafter, he brings that fidelity, and it is his poem, his philosophy, his sermon. When I stood on that blooming soil, amid that majestic work, I resolved that some time I would tell you the story of this life; wherefore now it trembles in the articulations of my voice, and it is not I that speak to you, but that faithful life.

In this life I see clearly what faithfulness is. First, and above all, it is a thoughtful consideration of what duty is; it is care in thinking, that the duty be set so high that to climb to it is worthy of a human soul. Then, secondly, it is *doing* that duty which thus is set above. And thirdly, it is doing *all* of that duty; *all*; not a part, not what may please us; but as we do the duty without thinking of pleasure, so it is doing *all* the duty, that which is most pleasing and that, too, which is hardest, all the same, in pure faithfulness. Finally, faithfulness is doing all the duty *every time*, unceasing, day by day; as the water drips, so the drops of duty falling on the soil beneath, until it blooms indeed. As "by every drop of sweat that falls into the furrow, the farmer reaps a spear of golden grain, or plucks the benediction of a flower," so it is this dropping of duty daily that covers the soil with moral and spiritual bloom; but only if daily it come, if it never falter, if it be steady day by day, pure duty, heavenly faithfulness.

"Faithful unto death," is my text; only that is faithfulness. It is told of Jesus that he was faithful to the end. What can be said grander of any life than that it is faithful to the end? It is this that is the test. Ah, it is easy to do some one great achievement. There never lived a man who at some time could not tower up to some big thing; but they are few, perhaps, who day by day bear the strain of the lowly, unseen, unpraised duty, and every day do it. That is faithfulness; and truly it is divine. The Hindoos have a saying, that if you are building a mountain, with a basket to carry the earth onto the plain, and you have towered up that mountain, and lifted it until it needs but one

more basket of earth for the peak, and you carry not up that basket, you have not made your mountain; but if you have put but one basket of earth on the plain, and are bringing another, you are building a mountain. This is faithfulness, this steady, unwearying truthfulness of labor to the end.

I learn from this life, too, that faithfulness is the true greatness. I tell you I stand with such a reverence before such a lowly faithfulness as no other greatness of human attainment wrings from me. I can remember, and it is not many years back, when I stood with a kind of wonder, struck dumb, before the achievements of a magnificent Cæsar, a Lord Bacon, Shakespeare, Eschylus, Homer, I care not whom; I know *now*, with all propriety of reverence that I must feel for grand powers, and especially for grand powers grandly applied, as with Homer and Shakespeare, still that to stand agape at them, as if theirs was the human greatness most godlike, was after all a kind of savage wonder and barbarian admiration, while before me, right around me, in humble goodness day by day done, I was looking on the very face of divinity, or could have looked on it; and now I humbly trust I have learned to see the countenance of God more, and to know that it looks straight forth from this real greatness of day-by-day faithfulness in lowly places.

Here stand I with this peculiar elevation of the pulpit to speak to you, and you listen to me in a manner that to me never ceases to be infinitely touching and humbling. And you come to me, some of you sometimes, with great praise for my speech; and then I feel more humbled, sometimes even struck all but to the ground with a sense of iniquity, almost I might say, in being the momentary occasion of your passing over the real glories of life to praise only those which from a conspicuous position shine. What is my speech to-day, what were it if it had all the power of a Shakespeare's words, all the majesty of Homer, the grandeur and solemnity of Æschylus, the grace of Virgil, compared with the godlike beauty and grandeur of that lowly, unnamed, uncelebrated life, that hath in it the substance of these poor words? Truly, not to be named; truly, but the garments of a great, divinely made body.

Says Amiel in his Journal, "The errand woman has just brought me my letters. Poor little woman, what a life! She

spends her nights in going backward and forward from her invalid husband to her sister, who is scarcely less helpless, and her days are passed in labor. Resigned and indefatigable, she goes on without complaining, till she drops. Lives such as hers prove something; that the true ignorance is moral ignorance, and that classification according to a greater or less degree of folly is inferior to that which proceeds according to a greater or less degree of virtue. The kingdom of God belongs not to the most enlightened, but to the best; and the best man is the most unselfish man. Humble, constant, voluntary, self-sacrifice,—this is what constitutes the true dignity of man. And, therefore, it is written, ‘The last shall be first.’ Society rests on conscience and not on science. Civilization is first and foremost a moral thing. Without honesty, without respect for law, without the worship of duty, without the love of one’s neighbors, in a word, without virtue, the whole is menaced and falls into decay; and neither letters nor art, neither luxury nor industry, nor rhetoric, nor the policeman, nor the custom-house officer, can maintain erect and whole an edifice of which the foundations are unsound. * * * * Duty is what upholds all. So that those who humbly and unobtrusively fulfill it, and set a good example thereby, are the salvation and the sustenance of this brilliant world, which knows naught of them.”

A late noble discourse says: “They have just erected a monument to Bruno, in Rome, on the site where amid the terrors of the *auto-da-fé*, his brave, serene soul stood unflinching witness to the eternal truth. * * * I could not think of committing the sacrilege of tendering pity to such a one as Bruno. * * * Nor is the late monument, erected amid the huzzas of an admiring world, any adequate compensation of what he suffered. Nor is it a compensation that Descartes and Kant and Hegel and Goethe have sat at his feet and called him master. He had other compensations, of a far higher order and of indestructible value. He needs no pity, for he conquered the world and appropriated all the good there is to be had in it as he went along. That fearless heroism in the search of truth was in itself the wealth of the Universe. * * * It may not be [such] a loud voice that speaks to you in the name of the eternal I OUGHT. It will not be a voice summoning you to rally an army or

to take your life in your hand and stand against the shock of some impending crisis. It will, perhaps, be no more than a still, small voice laying upon you the duty of a manly honesty, of asserting the liberty of your own soul, of stepping quietly into a path of truth in which you will be neither persecuted nor followed. What it says to you, what poor, humble drudgery of self-denial it imposes upon you, is of little consequence, an atom in the world struggle, no more. What is of supreme concern to realize is this, that it is the same voice that Bruno heard, and that it has the same living relation to your moral history that it had to his, and means through your sweeter liberty and clearer truth, to affect the moral history of mankind. If a grander manhood and a grander life are to come to the world, your heroism in your little obscure world, means help to prepare the way.”*

* C. F. Bradley, in *Unity*, Feb. 15. 1890.

